

VZCZCXRO5110  
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV  
DE RUEHDM #5449/01 3620648  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 280648Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2704  
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0281  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005449

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU, NEA/ELA, NSC FOR MARCHESE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: CODEL SPECTER MEETS SYRIAN FM MU'ALLIM

Classified By: Charge William Roebuck for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Visiting U.S. Senator Arlen Specter met with Syrian FM Walid Mu'allim for 75 minutes on December 25 in Damascus. The conversation covered U.S.-Syria relations, Syria's desire for resumed peace talks with Israel, allegations that Syria continues to meddle in Lebanon, steps to stabilize Iraq, and Iran. The FM shared threat information against U.S. citizens in India over the New Year's holiday. End Summary.

¶2. (C) U.S.-SYRIA RELATIONS: FM Mu'allim urged the USG to reopen unconditional constructive dialogue with Syria about regional issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, and the war on terror. "The USG has isolated Syria and in doing so has isolated themselves. It can't solve the problems in Iraq because it is too far away from the realities on the ground," the FM asserted. In response to the Senator's questions, Mu'allim said that the U.S. Administration has sought to isolate Syria since Secretary Powell's visit in April 2003 following the USG announcement that it would invade Iraq. Powell came with six demands that he presented first in a meeting to President Bashar al-Asad and then subsequently to press in Damascus, Mu'allim said. The public announcement of the demands ruled out Syrian cooperation, said Mu'allim, who noted, "You know Syria can achieve things with dialogue but not with demands."

¶3. (C) The Senator asked whether the Syrians really thought in 2003 that the U.S. would invade Syria from Iraq. Mu'allim answered that Pentagon advisor Richard Perle had written about the option. Mu'allim also stated that he and other SARG officials had feared such an eventuality but realized that the growing insurgency in Iraq precluded any such option. Senator Specter asked whether the SARG was afraid that the USG was now pushing for regime change in Syria. Mu'allim replied, "We receive reports that the Administration and the State Department are sending money to the Syrian opposition. But you can ask any Syrian on the street, and they will tell you that there is no Syrian opposition here." Mu'allim asserted that the SARG is most concerned about regional stability, noting that Syria is currently home to 500,000 Palestinians and "a million Iraqis." (Note: UNHCR estimates that there are 800,000 Iraqis living in Syria.) He added that during the Israel-Hizballah conflict over the summer, Syria hosted 300,000 displaced Lebanese and facilitated the departure via Syria of thousands of foreigners living in Lebanon. (Note: Nearly all the Lebanese returned to Lebanon shortly after the cessation of hostilities.)

¶4. (C) SYRIAN DESIRE FOR RESUMED PEACE TALKS WITH ISRAEL: Mu'allim argued that the USG should support the resumption of

unconditional, Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations that have clearly defined political goals. "Our goal is full peace with Israel--land for peace," he said. In response to the Senator's question, Mu'allim said Damascus would accept a process that included an Israel-Syria-Lebanon track and an Israel-Palestine track. Both tracks could progress separately toward their objectives, Mu'allim said. A Syria-Israel agreement would lead to security on Israel's northern border and remove the rationale for Hizballah arms by transforming Sheba'a Farms into a bilateral issue between Syria and Lebanon, he asserted.

15. (C) LEBANON: Without full peace with Israel, full implementation of UNSCR 1701 will never be achieved, Mu'allim predicted. "Historically, no conflict ends without a political solution," he said. In response to the Senator's question about allegations that Syria is facilitating the shipment of arms to Hizballah, Mu'allim denied the reports and said that neither the U.S. nor European interlocutors have produced decisive evidence to back up the charge. In response to the Senator's question about the allegation that some Syrian rockets hit Israel during the Israeli-Hizballah conflict, Mu'allim replied that Syrian rockets were available for sale in Iraq.

16. (C) When the Senator asked about reports in 2005 by UNIIIC investigators that Syria was involved in the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri, Mu'allim replied, "Why would we be involved? We say here that no wise man can shoot his own finger." He added, "Why would we need to blow him up in Beirut when Hariri frequently came to Damascus in his own car." (Comment: This is the standard Syrian response to allegations of Syrian involvement in

DAMASCUS 00005449 002 OF 002

Hariri's murder, which sidesteps the fact that Hariri's death and other subsequent assassinations are meant to warn opponents of Syrian influence in Lebanon.) Mu'allim further asserted that the German government removed UNIIIC investigator Detlev Mehlis from the investigation because his work was "politically motivated."

17. (C) IRAQ: Mu'allim said that Syria could help stabilize Iraq, citing as an example his three-day visit to Iraq in November, which led to the resumption of diplomatic relations after a 25-year rupture. He also highlighted the signing by Iraq's and Syria's Ministers of Interior of a memorandum of understanding on joint security cooperation. The MOU will result in increased Iraqi monitoring of other side of the border, a hotline between Ministers of Interior, and daily Syria-Iraq security meetings at border posts, he said. Although the MOU would not be 100 percent effective, it would help staunch the flow of foreign fighters who come to Syria because of its long border with Iraq, Mu'allim claimed. When the Senator pressed Mu'allim on how Syria could more directly assist the USG in stabilizing Iraq, the FM demurred, saying he would allow Syrian President Asad to discuss this in greater detail with the Senator.

18. (C) According to Mu'allim, the USG would need to take several steps to end bloodshed in Iraq, including: a re-examination of admission criteria for the Iraqi police force and army; an increase in the number of security officers being trained; the enlistment of Iraq's former military and police officers to assist in training; the dismantling of militias; and the modification of the Iraqi constitution so it is "more reassuring on the Arab identity of Iraq," with an explicit reference to Kirkuk as "a city of coexistence." (Comment: It is safe to assume that Syria is closely monitoring Kurdish actions in Iraq, given Syria's own Kurdish minority. End Comment.) Additionally, the USG should establish a timetable for the withdrawal of its forces from Iraq, even if such a pullout were projected to take five years, Mu'allim asserted. Such a move would oblige the Iraqis to prepare seriously for the U.S. departure and avoid a scenario like the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon, said

Mu'allim, adding that Syria did not want Iraq to fall into the hands of al-Qaida or other extremists. In response, the Senator quipped, "So, is Syria ready to take over Iraq?" Mu'allim responded, "We tried that before in Lebanon and that was enough." The Senator said, "But you didn't really leave Lebanon behind did you?"

¶9. (C) IRAN: In response to the Senator's query about U.S. policy toward Iran, Mu'allim called for the opening of a dialogue between Tehran and Washington. "Whether or not you agree with Iran, they are a regional power," said Mu'allim, noting Secretary Rice's recent meetings in the region with moderate Arab officials from countries such as Bahrain and the UAE. Those officials represented a million people, while Iran has a population of 77 million, Mu'allim stated. When the Senator asked whether Mu'allim agreed with him that Iran could not be trusted with a nuclear weapon, particularly given the Iranian President's call to wipe Israel from the map, Mu'allim countered by saying, "As an Arab and Syrian can I trust Israel?" He claimed, "In 1973, PM Golda Meir told Kissinger that she would use a nuclear weapon against Syria and Egypt."

¶10. (C) TERRORISM: Mu'allim stated that the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have lead to a spread of al-Qaida throughout the region, including in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The SARG is successfully containing extremists, said Mu'allim, citing the example of a December 23 raid on an al-Qaida cell in the Syrian city of Homs that led to the arrest of two French, four Saudis and two Syrians. Information obtained in the raid revealed al-Qaida plans to attack nightclubs in India frequented by American personnel on New Year's Eve, which was passed to India's Ambassador to Damascus, said Mu'allim, adding, "I'm telling you this because you are Arlen Specter, not the U.S. Embassy." The FM pressed for U.S.-Syria cooperation on terrorism, emphasizing, however, that any such efforts would only follow the resumption of U.S.-Syria political dialogue.

¶11. (U) The CODEL cleared this cable.  
ROEBUCK